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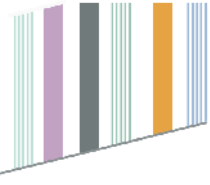
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“Dukatenscheißer”
Solo Exhibition Douglas Henderson
9/4--10/17/2009

Songs Upon the Air-Loom -Douglas Henderson's *Dukatenscheißer* and Other Works

Louise Milne

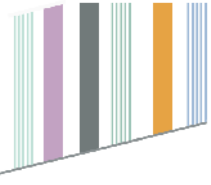
The *Dukatenscheißer* – excretor of ducats – is a figure from folk-lore. Candy mannikens in this form are sold in sweet shops across the region of wider Germanic culture, from the Netherlands to Bohemia. In folktales, the *Dukatenscheißer* is a cousin of the Goose That Lays the Golden Eggs and the Gold-excreting Donkey; unlike these two, it is a proverbial *figura*, rather than a character in a story. ² It was Pieter Bruegel the Elder who took the germ of this micro-myth and turned it into a fantastic hybrid monster, in the tradition of Hieronymous Bosch. In his great *Dulle Griet*,³ Bruegel's creature sits on a burning roof, the Ship of the World on its back, spooning silver ducats from its egg-shell rear. It functions as a grotesque satire on the excesses of the money-market, then, as now, in a state of collapse. Following the banking crisis of 2008/9, Douglas Henderson's new *Dukatenscheißer* presents us with a brilliantly re-invented version of this hybrid being. And Henderson's work here and elsewhere in this show does more than update the Bruegelian device. Under the sign of the *Dukatenscheißer*, these pieces singly and together examine questions of hybridity, metamorphosis, bodily desire and desire disembodied; they playfully deconstruct the form and meaning of latecapitalist dreams.

This *Dukatenscheißer* is an articulated tower of sewer pipes, coated in gold leaf, and punctuated with trumpet-like speakers. From these, apparently emanating from the hollow interior, pours a symphony of orchestrated noises, all connected to money and liquidity. To appreciate the wit and beauty of this piece, we have to understand the sense in which it transforms its source metaphor: the idea of the creature which shits gold. The work is part of a syntagmatic chain:⁵ successive generations of this *figura* express the history of humanity's increasingly tortured and torturous psychological relationship with money. Freud was not the first to recognise the strong association between excrement and treasure in the western imagination, but he was the first to understand how this pairing is knitted into certain typical expressions of adult sexuality. He found that gold and shit are connected in folk-jokes couched as dream-anecdotes, wherein a peasant is encouraged by the devil to mark the site of buried treasure by excreting on it; he wakes to find he has relieved himself in bed. This *dénouement* in fact interweaves several levels of *relief from tension*: physiological (the act of excretion), psychological (the punch-line of the joke), and narratological (the second frame appears around the story, revealing it to be a dream).

In the West, people seem to have begun to consider the equation between gold and excrement as uncanny instead of comic, and to envisage the transformation of one into the other as something occurring internally, around the time of the first commercial revolution (950-1350). So the hermit Peter Damian (c 1007-72), dreamed *his head swarmed with dizziness, and his intestines seemed to undulate with a swarm of vermin*, when he accepted a gift of silver.

This uneasiness seems to have its roots in the capacity of money to split any exchange into *mutually indifferent acts*, separated in time, and so enabling its consummation to be deferred indefinitely. The basic desire (or lack) motivating the transaction (and latent in it), is thus delayed, suspended, thwarted. As the money-economy spread, this expectation of delay became a Europe-wide habit of mind, eventually reified in the institutions of paper-money and credit. Meanwhile, the gold-bodycontents equation morphed accordingly. Bruegel's

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Dukatenscheißer is an emblem of the madness of the 16C Bourse and its crazy betting on futures. His creature does not merely excrete coins, it has to shovel them out of its broken back end with a long spoon, of the kind usually needed “to sup with the devil.” Down below, maddened miniature housewives gather the falling coins and rifle its purse. Regarded as a topological riff on the situation of money in men’s minds, this represents a considerable neurotic elaboration of Peter’s dizziness and queasiness.

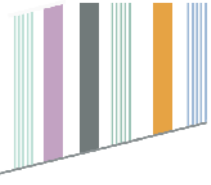
In Leonardo’s art, Freud intuited, a similar predilection for *fantastic formations* stemmed from a deflection of pre-conscious wishes in infancy. One might say that, as money lost weight and sensory resonance – metamorphosing from treasure to coins, paper to plastic to binary data– so the status of the desires wrapped up in delayed consummation became, as it were, constipated: bottled up and knotted into ever more bizarre forms. The general movement towards mass-neurosis in these matters was further complicated (understandably enough) by paranoia and hysteria, necessary condiments of the boom-bust cycles which have characterised life under capitalism ever since the time of the Bourse. Over the *longue durée*, the perpetually moving playing-fields of finance further displaced and twisted the metaphor of body-contents. New variants appear across a wide range of contexts in modernity –from the anal nightmares of brokers and bankers, to the schizophrenic delusions of the *Body-Without- Organs* and the *Influencing Machine*– and, of course, they appear in art.

Henderson’s lean and “empty” *Dukatenscheißer* responds to these complex stratifications and stresses in the cultural capital the *figura* has amassed to date. The “bachelors” in the lower zone of Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, for instance, are uniforms without heads, hands or feet. Suspended in glass, they hang from a rotary-mechanism linked to a chocolate grinder – an obvious metaphor for excretion. In the top zone, the “bride” is a mechanised praying mantis, balanced by a cloud, divided from the bachelor-machine. Both Bruegel and Duchamp found parallels in alchemical imagery for their inventions – the idea of magical cooking is folded in to the *Dukatenscheißer* tradition – while transmutation itself has clear affinities with making art. Henderson’s work also resembles a kind of *athanor* – the alchemical womb-crucible – distilling out an occult quintessence from mundane ingredients.

In this sense, the body of the *Dukatenscheißer* stands for Henderson himself; the artist is the occult vessel in whose bowels (so to speak), these ingredients have been “cooked.” The technology of recording sound is itself a kind of alchemy. Dozens of recordings dealing with money and liquidity spiral down the *Dukatenscheißer* tower: coins rolling, pouring down pipes, spinning, sifting, jingling in pockets, dropping into water. At the top, these sounds are convolved with noises from a casino, an old tickertape machine, a neighbourhood Turkish street market, street-noise after a football game. At the bottom, guttering candles, running water, water in pipes, and market recordings plunge downward, like eddies in a river. Coins roll through it all. This vertical sound axis cross-pollinates a range of individual “notes” into hybrid “chords” – whose effect is metamorphic and mysterious, greater than the sum of the parts.

Hybridisation is an important part of the aesthetic here. It is a technique central to the surreal visual style of Bosch and Bruegel, and to folk-fantasies such as the *Dukatenscheißer*. Using sound-imagery, Henderson re-engineers the basic metaphorical structure of the hybrid-form, changing its stresses and topology, so to speak, in mid-air. To see exactly how he does this, we must consider the semiotics of the hybrid, and how this is bound up with the representation of the imaginary, dreams and the occult, in the Western tradition.

Freud argued that we should understand dream imagery in terms of *condensed* and *displaced* memories, and the point 12 about a condensed or displaced image is that it is hybrid. Hybrids came to signify dreamexperience after a long history of employment on shrines, tombs, citygates, manuscripts and other



boundary zones. An angel (part-human, part-bird), for instance, is a marker of visions, divine messages and graves. Wrapped around the skin and undersides of churches, we find hybrid mythological forms, including folk-motifs. Individually, they connote animal desires, "non-sense", the Rabelaisian *zone-below-the-belt*. Collectively, they are all *adynata* (impossibilities): a genre of signs that distinguish fantastic or occult thresholds. An *adynaton* denotes something impossible, in possible terms. Any hybrid image is thus an *adynaton*, made of parts of mundane things; it is the fact that these parts are *fused* together (as in a winged-human) which indicates the entity's occult status. *Adynata* can also be regarded as end-products of Freudian dream-processes, of condensation and displacement.

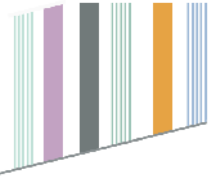
The same images we see on the cathedrals or hear in folk-tales (or at the cinema) also populate the private imagination; so the "externalised" occult defines an "internalised" or psychological occult and *vice versa*. With or without its supernatural scaffolding, the occult thus has an intrinsic experiential existence; it is, in the words of Alfred Gell, *the place where things are when they are not happening*.¹⁴ Some kind of "discourse of the occult" is generated by the limits of consciousness (sleep, death, ecstasy), and is required to mediate these limits.¹⁵ At the same time, the boundaries of the occult (internal or external) are endlessly challenged, written and rewritten, according to changing historical circumstance, and this involves the creation and deployment of new *adynata*.

This argument is elegantly demonstrated in Henderson's *Fadensonnen*: essentially a double-helix whose climax is orchestrated as an *adynaton*. Speaker-cones – each an orange sun in a translucent blue sky – spiral up and down around a thick rope hanging from the ceiling. They constitute a translation of Paul Celan's *Fadensonnen*. Following the arc of the poem, we stand on a barren landscape (footsteps crunch at the foot of the "tree"), look up into the branches (book pages flutter upwards around the axis), and imagine an ineffable harmony where the soft fractal edge of the treetop touches/holds the sky. At the ceiling, a musical cloud gathers: sonic "light-tones" made of footsteps, jingling keys, and tones produced by an electronic brush, as the artist traced the lines of bare tree branches over a photograph. It is this hybrid sound which "translates" the *songs beyond humanity* of the poem: convolutions in the fabrication of the sound match the double sense of impossibility in the poem. Neither eye nor ear can follow the near-infinite complexities of the place where tree, sky and light are interwoven; the mind must apprehend this as a gestalt whose significance points beyond the veil of perception, to *the place where things are when they are not happening*.

Because *adynata* are internally fluid, the recipe for each composite type allows for an endless modification of the relationships among its parts. This fluidity is raised to the level of an organising principle in all the work here. Thus the elements of the *Dukatenscheißer*, collectively manifest an endlessly diverse cylindrical sound-field – a new "corpus" – whose primary aesthetic impact is a sense of marvellous exhilaration. This *Dukatenscheißer* is fundamentally deconstipated; turning inside out the tradition on which it is founded. Its mobile choreography "solves" the splitting and thwarting of desire at the root of money-neurosis, and recovers the multiple sense of "release" in the earlier peasant jokes. Henderson comments, *Though the coins flow downward, it is in no way a depressing piece. I see the financial crisis also as an internal crisis within myself, ("...purgatory can here be understood as a place or state within the self...")*.

For *If I were you*, Henderson collected 160 songs by different writers, where the first word is *I*. Surfing the vast set of would-be songwriters on myspace.com, he followed webpages linking to other "friends" and so on and on. The installation plays the songs in batches of sixteen, with the *I*s perfectly lined up. The music thus starts in a staggered way, from different points in space, accumulating into chaos as the songs pan across the room.

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Out of this illegibility, for an instant, they come together in one place and time: when the word *I* is heard clearly in chorus; then descending into static, petering out into individual songs again. The effect is *like waves on the seashore. A seashore made up of aspiring songwriters*. This piece neatly lampoons certain clichés of internet culture and content (*surfing the web, a flood of creativity*) – the ocean of ether, composed of millions of pages and billions of mouse-clicks. At the same time, the position of the *I* (an *island* in the sea of noise – the *eye* of the storm) – performs an elegant transformation of hybrid aesthetic structure. At first sight, its point of fusion – the *navel of the dream* – is the sliding 18 signifier of the firstperson. But this curious sign, as Lacan realised, is universally empty and variable, capable of occupation by anyone or no one, hiding identity as much as it asserts it. Here, as it is spoken (sung) by 160 voices at once, all impossibly present in one moment and one space, it is the pivot around which breaks an unreadable fusion.

The paradoxes of *eye* and *I* drive the delightful and disturbing *Romeo y Julieta, Act II Scene II*. Henderson and Stefan Bohnenberger have constructed here a small machine for the rearrangement of time, space and desire. Inside the cigar-box is a tiny cinema. Looking in, both space and screen seem vast and out of scale, as if seen from the back row of the theatre. Moving on this dream-screen is a tiny film – enigmatic in black & white. Cued by the title, we might think we see the columns of Juliet's balcony – or an object (her comb?) – so enlarged as to be rendered otherworldly, as in Man Ray's experiments with scale.

In the front row, as it were, a small soft black sphere (Romeo?) sits between us and the film. The soundtrack is filled with sounds from a modern romance – clinking wineglasses, light footsteps – referring to the eponymous lovers in their most famous scene. Yet there is more going on than meets the eye. Gell's concept of the distributed self – that aspects of personal identity are invested in contiguous people and things²⁰ – is relevant here. We might discern here a distributed self of the interior, with paths in and out through the cavities of the body and secret spaces of the mind. Just as the screen-image and the illusion of great scale open out the box to an impossible degree, the placement of ball and screen-image opens the frame of reference into deep psychoanalytic time – the space of infancy. The ball is small and soft-looking, lit by the moving image inside the frame; the giant ridges, which also evoke teeth, loom over it, yet cannot touch it. It is as if we are looking at the memory of a primal scene, filled with indecipherable desire. This box too is an *athanor*, a crucible where a kind of excruciation is held in check.

It is clear by now that all these works spiral around the sign of infinity. In *Dukatenscheißer*, a multiplicity of composite micro-narratives – like Bruegelian micro-myths – are orchestrated into a fountain of liquidity. This re-choreographs (and indeed relieves) discrepancies of lack & excess – the kinks and bottlenecks – in its master-metaphor. In *Fadensonnen*, an analogue is presented for a suture between microcosm and macrocosm: God is in the details, whose plenitude escapes us. In *If I were You*, the structure of the *adynaton* is turned inside out. If the *Dukatenscheißer* reimagines the lower half of the body (the *zone-below-the-belt*) as a joyous absurd *athanor*, in *Romeo y Julieta*, we are taken to another country of the self, a version of Plato's cave, where the mysteries of desire and their origin in infancy are dramatised in a dream-like tableau.

Running through all these works is a modern energy, an unmistakable humour and wit; perhaps the most essential hallmark of Henderson's art. As the playing-fields of culture shift – as collapsing money-markets reconfigure desire and value – matters which to previous generations were objects of trauma are gentled and changed in the collective imagination. We begin to apprehend them rather as absurd and fascinating, as sources of wonder and humour. This is the achievement of Henderson's brandnew *adynata*, his liberating songs upon the Air-Loom.